

GARY CHAPMAN

NY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE FIVE LOVE LANGUAGES*



ANGER

**HANDLING
A POWERFUL
EMOTION IN A
HEALTHY WAY**



GARY
CHAPMAN

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*To those individuals who over the years have
shared with me their personal struggles with anger
and in so doing forced me to search for answers
to the troublesome experience of anger*

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INTRODUCTION: OUR ANGRY WORLD

ANGER IS EVERYWHERE. Spouses are angry at each other. Employees are angry at bosses. Teens are angry at parents (and vice versa). Citizens are angry at their government. Television news routinely shows angry demonstrators shouting their wrath. Spend some time around a major airport when bad weather has canceled flights, and you will observe anger in action.

Many of us are angry at ourselves. Sometimes we are angry and think we “shouldn’t feel that way.” Or we observe our children expressing anger inappropriately and wonder how to teach them to deal with their anger.

Clearly, many of us have “issues” with anger. In addition, Christians are often confused about this powerful and complex emotion. For those who follow Christ, is there ever an appropriate expression of anger? What does the Bible say? Can anger ever be a *good* thing?

If, in searching for answers to these questions, you go online and type “anger” into a search engine, you will find an overwhelming amount of information. Yet most of what has been written does not deal with two fundamental questions: What is the *origin* of anger, and what is the *purpose* of anger? Why do men and women experience the emotion of anger? Understanding the origin of anger is essential to understanding the purpose of anger, and understanding the purpose of anger is essential to learning how to process anger in a constructive manner.

The few books and articles that do raise the question of origins tend to see anger as a survival technique in humans’ early evolutionary development. Anger is “nature’s way” of preparing humans to respond in times of danger. As one who holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in the field of anthropology, I believe this view is woefully inadequate. In the first place, it ignores the Christian worldview; and secondly, even if one accepts a naturalistic worldview, it does not adequately explain the psychological aspects of anger.

Much of the confusion among Christians about the emotion of anger flows from a misunderstanding of the origin of anger. Christian literature on anger has tended to focus on controlling it—without an adequate understanding of

the source of anger. But I am convinced that our efforts at controlling anger will be much more effective if we have a clearer understanding of the source of anger.

So where does anger come from? What is its origin? The answer, which may surprise you, is found in chapter 1—and the answer suggests anger's purpose, which is described in chapter 2.

I have counseled couples and families for more than thirty-five years now. I have worked with hundreds of families dealing with multiple family problems. In almost all cases, these families or couples have struggled with processing anger. When adults know how to deal with their own anger in healthy, positive ways, they not only create a more secure environment for the family; they also have greater potential for teaching their children how to process anger. Equally important, they are able to build a productive work environment, engaging effectively with their coworkers. When adults have *not* learned to process their anger, marital and family turmoil usually results, sometimes spilling over at work or other settings.

In the Western world, a common remedy is to seek counseling. Indeed, in America the counseling office has become the major forum for learning to process anger. Unfortunately, most people do not go for counseling until their mismanagement of anger has gotten them into serious trouble. Thousands of others who are already in serious trouble never go for counseling at all. Perhaps you cannot (because of time, money, or fear) step into the counselor's office. I believe that much of what is learned in the counseling office could be learned in the living room if adults had adequate information. This book is an attempt to put into readable form the insights and techniques that have helped hundreds of couples and single adults discover a better way to process anger. The names of all clients have been changed, but their situations and conversations are real. At times, you may recognize issues and responses similar to your own. All of us can learn much about processing our anger more effectively.

If you, or someone you love, is struggling with anger, I hope this volume will help you gain a fresh—and Christian—perspective on anger. I also hope that as you gain this new perspective, you will be equipped to understand and deal with your anger or that of someone close to you. Additionally, my hope is that this book will provide interested individuals with a tool that will stimulate group discussion and workshops on the topic of anger. The discussion guide at the end of this book and online at

www.fivelanguages.com will help you review key ideas and apply them to your life. I am convinced that much can be learned about anger in an educational setting (a small group, a Sunday school class, or seminar) as well as in the counseling office. In fact, this must happen if we are going to turn the tide on the epidemic of verbal and physical abuse that characterizes our generation.

When we bring our anger under the lordship of Christ—when we learn from a holy God about the origin and purpose of anger—we can heal our relationships. Most important, we can accomplish God’s good purposes.

Gary Chapman

*Anyone can become angry—that is easy,
but to be angry with the right person at
the right time, and for the right purpose and
in the right way—that is not within everyone's
power, and that is not easy.*

ARISTOTLE



PERHAPS YOU CAN identify with Brooke.

Brooke, the mother of two preschoolers, loved her husband, Glen, an up-and-coming attorney. The couple had been married eight years. Brooke was a certified public accountant but had chosen to put her career on hold until the children started school.

“I think I made a mistake,” she told me. “I don’t think I am cut out to be a mother. I always wanted children, but now that I’ve got them, I don’t like the way I treat them. And I don’t like what they do to me. I don’t ever remember being angry or losing my temper before I had children. I always considered myself to be in control of my emotions. But I have to admit, I have often ‘lost it’ with my children. I hate myself when I do that, and I know that it’s not good for the children.”

“What do you do when you lose it with the children?” I inquired.

“Different things,” she said. “Sometimes I yell at them. Sometimes I spank them really hard. The other day I picked up Ginger and shook her. That really scared me. I had seen on television just the day before a report of a mother who actually killed her child by shaking her. I don’t want to hurt my children. I love them, but I just lose control. I wish Glen would keep the kids and give me a break, but he is so stressed in his job that he says he doesn’t feel like caring for them. I think maybe I should go back to work and let someone else

take care of the children.”

“I ALWAYS WANTED CHILDREN, BUT NOW THAT I’VE GOT THEM, I DON’T LIKE THE WAY I TREAT THEM.”

As I talked further with Brooke, I discovered that she was angry not only with her children’s behavior but also with Glen for giving her so little help. She was angry at herself for choosing to be a full-time mom, and ultimately she was angry with God for allowing her to be a mother. “He should have known that I wouldn’t be able to handle this,” she said.

By now Brooke was crying. To be honest, I felt like crying too, as I remembered the hundreds of mothers who have passed through my office over the years, looking for a place to resign.

Then there was Bill, who came to my office well dressed, but I noticed his right foot was shoeless. I soon found out why.

“I’ve got to have help,” he began. “I’ve known for a long time that my anger was getting out of control, but Saturday was the last straw. For fifteen minutes, I tried to get my lawnmower started. I checked the gas, I checked the oil, I put in a new spark plug, and still it wouldn’t start. Finally, I got so exasperated that I stepped back and kicked the thing. I broke two toes and cut a third. Sitting on the steps in pain, I said to myself, ‘That was really stupid.’

“I’m embarrassed. I can’t tell people what really happened, so I’ve been saying, ‘I had an accident with a lawnmower.’

“This is not the first time I’ve lost my temper,” he continued. “I’ve said some pretty nasty things to my wife and children in the past. I don’t think I have ever physically abused them, but I’ve come close.”

In the course of our conversation I discovered that Bill was highly educated, holding an MBA degree. He was married with two children, profitably employed, and owned a nice house in suburbia. Bill was an active member of his church and well respected in the community. Yet Bill had a habit of “blowing his cool.”

Thousands of men can readily identify with Bill. Unfortunately, many of them are not as honest as he, and even fewer of them are willing to reach out for help.

Bill, with his broken toes, and Brooke, with her broken heart, are dealing with very different challenges. However, what they hold in common is the human experience of intense anger and their inability to handle it. Both knew

that their anger had led them to inappropriate behavior, but neither knew what to do about it. Thus, they suffered physically and emotionally from their destructive responses to anger—and their loved ones were suffering too.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE GET ANGRY?

People of all ages and social status experience anger. Brian, a high school student, is angry at the teacher who gave him a D on his report card. Liz, Brian's teacher, is angry with her "ex" for failing to send the child-support checks on time. Maria, an eighty-five-year-old grandmother, is angry with her oldest son, who seldom comes to see her; her son, Vincent, is angry in general because he can't find a job and feels rejected by society. Marvin, a pastor, is angry with church leadership who always shoot down his best ideas. Bethany is only three years old, but she is angry with her mother, who took away her favorite toy.

But what do we mean by anger? The dictionary describes *anger* as "a strong passion or emotion of displeasure, and usually antagonism, excited by a sense of injury or insult."¹ Although we normally think of anger as an emotion, it is in reality a cluster of emotions involving the body, the mind, and the will.

And we don't sit down and say, "I think I will now experience anger." Anger is a response to some event or situation in life that causes us irritation, frustration, pain, or other displeasure. Thousands of events and situations have the potential for provoking anger. An elderly relative makes a tactless comment about your child's weight. The guy behind you on the expressway follows too closely. Your father was always angry about something when you were growing up, and now you have trouble managing your own anger.

Anger is fed by feelings of disappointment, hurt, rejection, and embarrassment. Anger pits you against the person, place, or thing that sparked the emotion. It is the opposite of the feeling of love. Love draws you toward the person; anger sets you against the person.

But the mind is also active from the very beginning. For example, if Becky asks her husband, Tim, to mow the lawn while she takes the kids shopping, and she comes home hours later and the grass is still shaggy, she may think: *If he cared, he would mow the lawn. He knows how much it means to me. I don't ask for much. What was he doing instead?—what he wanted to do. How selfish.* But Tim responds inwardly: *Look at everything else I've been doing!*

I sealed the deck, took out the garbage, and walked the dog. What does she want?

Meanwhile, Mark sits simmering in his department's conference room while Jeff, his manager, tells him his numbers are down this quarter; and if he doesn't start producing, the company might have to let him go. *It's because I'm over fifty*, Mark thinks. *They're trying to get rid of all the old guys. Jeff is what, about thirty-five? What does he know?*

Becky, Tim, and Mark are all experiencing strong negative emotions—in their minds. But there's more. The body also gets in on the experience of anger. The body's autonomic nervous system “gets the adrenaline flowing.” Depending upon the level of anger, any or all of the following may happen physically. The adrenal glands release two hormones: epinephrine (adrenaline) and norepinephrine (noradrenaline). These two chemicals seem to give people the arousal, the tenseness, the excitement, the heat of anger, and in turn these hormones affect the heart rate, blood pressure, lung function, and digestive tract activity.² So as Mark sits in the conference room listening to his boss, he can feel his face flushing, his stomach churning, and his fists clenching. It is these physiological changes that give people the feeling of being overwhelmed by anger and being unable to control it.

KIDS AND TANTRUMS

Temper tantrums typically appear at age two or three and start to decline by age four, report journals of pediatrics and family practice. Up to 83 percent of all two-to four-year-olds have occasional tantrums, which include lying on the floor, kicking, screaming, and occasionally holding one's breath.

Then the anger spills over into action: Brooke shakes her preschooler, Bethany throws a tantrum, Bill kicks the lawnmower, and Mark returns to his cubicle and starts to compose a furious e-mail.

We can't control our bodily reactions; however, we can control our mental and physical responses to anger. We'll look at that in upcoming chapters.

WHY ANGER?

But first, let's look again at the roots of anger: where it comes from and why we experience it.

I believe that the human capacity for anger is rooted in the nature of God. Please do not think that I am being disrespectful of God. On the contrary, I stand in deep reverence of God when I suggest that human anger is rooted in the divine nature. Further, I am not suggesting that anger is an essential part of the nature of God. I am suggesting that anger derives from two aspects of God's divine nature: God's holiness and God's love.

The Scriptures proclaim that God is holy. (See, for example, 1 Peter 1:16; Leviticus 11:44-45.) The word *holy* means "set apart from sin." Whether we are talking about God the Father, God the Son, or God the Spirit, there is no sin in the nature of God. The New Testament writer said of Jesus that He was "tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15).

THE SCRIPTURES NEVER SAY, "GOD IS ANGER."

A second fundamental characteristic of the nature of God is love. The apostle John summarized the whole teaching of Scripture when he said simply, "God is love" (1 John 4:8, italics added). Love is not to be equated with God; rather, in His essential nature God is loving. This is not simply the New Testament concept of God. From beginning to end, the Scriptures reveal God as committed to the well-being of His creatures. It is God's nature to love.

It is from these two divine characteristics that God's anger is derived. Please note: The Scriptures never say, "God is anger." That statement is not, in fact, true. Anger is not a part of the essential nature of God. However, the Bible often indicates that God *experiences* anger. The word *anger* is found 455 times in the Old Testament; 375 of these refer to God's anger. In fact, the psalmist said, "God is angry with the wicked every day" (Psalm 7:11 KJV).

God's anger was not limited to Old Testament times. Read the life of Jesus, and you will see numerous occasions where Jesus demonstrated anger.

(For example, see Mark 3:1-5; John 2:13–17.) *Because* God is holy and *because* God is love, God necessarily experiences anger. His love seeks only the good of His creatures. His holiness stands forever against sin. All of God’s moral laws are based upon His holiness and His love; that is, they are always aligned with what is right, and they are always for the good of His creatures. God desires humans to do what is right and enjoy the benefits. He said to ancient Israel, “See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess” (Deuteronomy 30:15–16).

Knowing the detrimental effects of man’s sin, God’s anger is stirred. It is God’s concern for justice and righteousness (both of which grow out of His holiness and His love) that stimulate God’s anger. Thus, when God sees evil, He experiences anger. Anger is His logical response to injustice or unrighteousness.

“HE SHOULDN’T DO THAT TO HER”

So what does all of this have to do with human anger? The Scriptures say that we are made “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27). Though that image was marred by the fall, it was not erased. People still bear the imprint of God’s image deep within their souls. Thus, even though we are fallen, we still have some concern for justice and Tightness. Find the most pagan man you know and follow him for a week, and you will hear him make such statements as: “That’s not right. He shouldn’t do that to her. She treated him wrongly.” Steal his car and see if he expresses anger. Slander his daughter or wife or girlfriend and you will find that suddenly he is an extremely moral creature, condemning your action outright.

Listen to the young child who is beginning to put words into sentences, and you will soon hear the child say, “That’s not fair, Mommy.” Where did the child obtain that moral judgment? I suggest that it is stamped deep within his nature, tempered by parental teaching, to be sure, but the child knows when he or she has been wronged and will express it freely.

ANGER IS EVIDENCE THAT WE ARE MADE IN GOD’S IMAGE.

Anger, then, is the emotion that arises whenever we encounter what we perceive to be wrong. The emotional, physiological, and cognitive dimensions of anger leap to the front burner of our experience when we encounter injustice.

Why does a wife experience anger toward her husband? Because in her mind he has disappointed, embarrassed, humiliated, or rejected her. In short, he has “done her wrong.” Why do teenagers experience anger toward parents? Because the teenager perceives that the parents have been unfair, unloving, unkind—that the parents have done wrong. Why does a man kick his lawnmower? Because the lawnmower is not “working right.” The machine, or its manufacturer, has done him wrong. Why do drivers honk their horns when the traffic light turns green? Because they reason that the person

in front of them “*should* be paying attention to the light and should have accelerated two seconds earlier.”

Try to remember the last time you experienced anger and ask the question, Why did I get angry? Chances are your answer will mention some injustice. Someone or something did not treat you fairly. Something was wrong. Your anger may have been directed toward a person, an object, a situation, yourself, or God, but in every instance someone or something treated you wrongly. We are not discussing whether your perception of wrong is valid or invalid. We will deal with that in a later chapter. What we are establishing is that anger originates in the perception that some thing is wrong and that this sense of morality (some things are right and some things are wrong) finds its root in the fact that we are created in the image of a God who is holy and has established moral law for the good of His creatures.

Anger is not evil; anger is not sinful; anger is not a part of our fallen nature; anger is not Satan at work in our lives. Quite the contrary. Anger is evidence that we are made in God’s image; it demonstrates that we still have some concern for justice and righteousness in spite of our fallen estate. The capacity for anger is strong evidence that we are more than mere animals. It reveals our concern for Tightness, justice, and fairness. The experience of anger is evidence of our nobility, not our depravity.

We should thank God for our capacity to experience anger. When one ceases to experience anger, one has lost her sense of moral concern. Without moral concern, the world would be a dreadful place indeed. That brings us to our second major question: What is the purpose of anger? More to the point, what is *God’s* purpose for human anger?